

Praetor

by Dannell Lites

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Praetor

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SPIFFY DISCLAIMER THINGIE!

Ah don't own them Marvel does and Ah ain't making a plug nickel off this so if ya'll sue the only thing ya'll will get is my comic collection:):)

Rated PG-13 for absolute purity of content other than a tiny suggestion of some loving between Gladiator and Oracle! Hee!

No continuity to speak of and if'n Ah got anything wrong Ah apologise and await futher instructions!

Praetor A Tale of The Imperial Guard By Dannell Lites

I am Mouli Senah Kallark Bel Farsi. I am called many things; Praetor Pontifex, The Emperor's Shield and Fist of The Imperium. I am best known as Gladiator. But my *name* is Mouli. It means "Loyal One" and I am justly proud of it. I am the last of my kind. Search among the stars and you will not find my like anywhere. They are all dead. The Shi'ar found me buried deep among the ancient asteroid ruins of a destroyed planet and cloned me. They will not tell me about myself or what they know of my vanished people. It may be that they know nothing. But, I suspect they are afraid. This is shameful to me. I wonder what I have done to deserve their punishment. I am loyal. In an unending line that goes back for over a thousand generations there have been Gladiators who served the Imperium. When one dies they make another. I am a soldier. I have no other purpose. I have my duty and I obey it.

But I do not always enjoy it.

Deathbird tasks me. The sister of Lilandra, the Majetrix Shi'ar, is

mad. But I am bound to serve her. Her brother the Emperor D'Ken was mad also and yet, I served him faithfully as well. But the Shi'ar no longer speak of him. There is madness in the Royal House of Neramani and no one will speak of it. Deathbird is petty and cruel but I endure her many slights and her verbal abuse. I say nothing. She fears me and so must constantly prove to herself that I am no threat with these endless, meaningless small and hurtful things. She will make me bow before her and publically acknowledge her station. This is irksome. I am not vain. Proud, yes, but not vain. Gladly would I give her proper obeisance ... did she not **require** it of me. But power such as mine is a frightening thing. These hands can move mountains, lay waste to worlds.

Yes, Deathbird is right to fear me.

My temper is quick. I know this about myself. It has been the death of more than one Gladiator. When I was young my teachers were very strict with me. "Govern yourself, Kallarch," they demanded of me. "You will be the better for it." They did not say, "Unless you do you are dangerous." They did not have to. It was not necessary.

Or wise.

And, above all, they are very **wise** men, my teachers.

Hala is ... disturbing.

I am bound to the Shi'ar by blood and my own will. To be an obedient soldier is my pride. It is the heart of what I am. I have never desired to be ought else. And still these Kree trouble me. They are stubborn and stiff necked. But there is pride in this futile resistance of theirs. This is a thing that I understand, this pride.

"You wouldn't understand," my mad mistress sneers at me when I ask why they must die. "You are not Shi'ar."

No, I am not.

But Deathbird does herself no great service to remind me of that.

I wonder ... My unknown people ...

Would they have resisted the Imperium as the Kree do? Would they have succeeded, I wonder? Perhaps it is my pride that speaks, but if I am any example, the Shi'ar would have found them no soft target, I think.

Such thoughts are heresy, I know this. But they prowl my dreams and my waking hours alike, persistent beasts of prey. They plague me these Kree. Why will they not do the sensible thing and surrender? Cease these foolish struggles of theirs? The Guard is restless. We are warriors, not jailers. The others chafe and complain under Deathbird's lash. Matters are uneasy. But still they obey me. They have not, any of them, fallen so far as **that**. Am I not their Praetor, after all? Never before have I failed them.

Until now.

Oracle, the Lady Sybil, warns me of the future. "Mouli," she says to

me in confidence, "none of us are happy. Can we not go home? Away from this madness?"

And I have no good answer for her.

"Lead us Home, Praetor," demands Electron.

Lead us ... Lead us ...

But where shall I lead them? Where **is** our Home? Where is **my** Home?

"Your heart knows, Mouli," replies Sybil. "Listen when it speaks to you."

Even when it speaks treason?

"You trouble me, woman," I growl.

"But you will heed me," she prophecies merrily, "will you not?"

"Because it is my pleasure!" I snap at her, annoyed, as ever, by her cetainty and my own transparency.

"And you will aid the Kree?" she asks, less sure of this. I am pleased by that.

"Because it is my pleasure!" I cry and stamp my foot. Her laughter is like music, high and clear and most pleasing to my ears. Her lover's kiss is like starlight, deep and soft and sweet upon my flesh.

"Brothers!" she chuckles to the rest of the anxious, waiting Guard, "we have misjudged him. Our Praetor will not lead us Home because it is his duty ..."

"No!" I snarl, growing more wroth.

"... Our Praetor will not lead us Home even to spite the mad Viceroy Deathbird ..."

"No!"

"... Our Praetor will lead us Home ... because it is his pleasure ..."

Clever, clever woman! To so use my own pride against me. Sybil knows me well. My eyes narrow in irritation.

"Thy mother was a Skrull ... " I mutter weakly in Old Shi'ar. The Lady of Shi'ar only laughs her tinkling laugh once more.

"Careful, my love," she advies archly, murmuring into the bright flesh of my neck as she caresses me with her small, gentle hands. "What, after all, does that make **you**?" My deeper laughter joined hers and for a good long time silence reigns between us. Words are clumsy things at times. Any good telepath will tell you that. And Sybil is the best. There are none better in all the Empire. She sighs and settles into the hollow of my shoulder.

"Mouli, please," she pleaded softly, "Take us Home. Before it's too late. Before we lose ourselves."

So be it, then. A soldier is also a man and a man has many duties; to his superiors, to others ... and not least of all to himself. I have forgotten this. My teachers fought long to teach me restraint and honor and they have triumphed in this matter.

But, I do not think they would admire their success.

My teachers taught me many things; loyalty and the arts of a fighting man. I am a fine tactician and the history of warfare is well known to me. I was carefully trained. I was to be the Emperor's Shield and the Fist of the Imperium and so my teachers took great care with me. From my infancy I heard stories of other Galdiators, my predecessors and longed to imitate their great feats of heroism and glory.

"Patience, small one," they smiled at me for they were fond of me in their way, "you will take your place among them one day. But first you must learn." And so they schooled me in my hard lessons of fealty and war. When I failed them they punished me with remorse and guilt. They had no other weapons.

"We are very disappointed in you, Kallach," they told me. "Are gratitude and forthrightness so foreign to your nature that you cannot learn them? For shame!"

They did *not* teach me that honor comes in many forms. And glory ...

For millenia a Shi'ar Commander who brings ignominious defeat to the enemies of the Imperium has enjoyed the triumph of a Blooding. With great pomp, he or she is celebrated throughout the Empire in song and dance by the greatest artists of the day at a tumultuous public Festival. The Vizir draws their blood and that of the sovereign and they are joined with the reigning Majestrix. In ancient days it was an actual marriage of state. I was 15 the first time it happened to me, the proudest day of my life. Leading the Fleet for the first time, I left the Illyrians bleeding and broken in my wake. I drew my blood with a fingernail, the Vizir drew D'Ken's with a knife and bound the wounds together with a white cloth, soon stained with our mingled blood.

"We are one, Mouli Senah," whispered my Emperor fiercely in my ear.

But I remember other things, too.

Approaching the waiting Emperor in my triumphal aircar, my ceremonial armor gleaming golden in the bright sun of Chandiliar, I can yet hear the voice of the common soldier at my back. Dressed simply to reflect my humble origins, he, too, whispers in my ear ... reminding me that all glory is fleeting.

There are many things, it seems, that my teachers never taught me.

For, above all things, my teachers were *wise* men.

"There is illness among the Guard, Viceroy," I tell Deathbird, "we must return to Chandiliar and medical attention." Her private aerie is sumptuous, yet at once stark and wild as she herself. On savage wings, the sister of Lilandra glides to my feet, standing as tall as she can. Her anger is sharp and shrill, like her voice.

"Traitor!" she shrieks at me and breaks her hand when she slaps me. I do not prevent her. The crack of her delicate bones is strangely satisfying. To her credit, she does not cry out when she realizes her mistake. She never lacked courage and I admire that. "You will not be allowed to leave, Gladiator! I am Viceroy here and I forbid it!" Her other hand moves to strick me once more.

On the other hand, she is a great fool and I do **not** admire that. It is child's play for me to catch her hand and hold it still in midair despite her hardest struggles.

"Have a care, Viceroy ... " I caution her in a voice brimming with gentle solicitude. "You still have one good hand left. I wouldn't want you to injure it as well." When I release her, she glares at me but lowers her hand.

"I have already spoken to the Majestrix," I say gavelly, "and she agrees that the danger is great. The Guard must withdraw. On her orders." She discards the holovid containing her sisters formal order with a neglegent flick of her wrist.

Deathbird regards me with coveteous eyes from crown to sole. Although I do not enjoy being thusly unclothed in the imagination of such as she, I make no outward protest. Her imagination is where such things will **remain**.

"And you, yourself, Praetor?" comes her mild inquiry, unexpectedly gracing me with my well earned title. "You are well?" Her smile is mocking, furious. My lips thin in suspicion. What is she after? I am not subject to the ravages of disease. Whatever ills my people may have suffered died with them. Deathbird knows this.

"Yes, I am well."

Deathbird pounces upon my reluctant admission like one of her ancestors upon their helpless prey. "Good! Then the Lady Sybil will led the Guard back to Chandiliar and treatment for their ... malaise ... **You** will remain here and serve me." I watch the malicious gleam in her dark eye grow and fester like a neglected wound. Caught in a trap of my own clumsy devising, I can only grit my teeth in frustration. So, I am to be hostage for the release of the Guard. Very well. I am not a devious man. Sybil would tell me that I should have forseen this and she is right. No, I am not subtle.

But I **do** learn most quickly. All my teachers remarked upon it.

It occurs to me that if I remain on Hala there is much that I may do here. These Kree are in need of ... help. Help that I may give them ... a raid that succeeds by a hairsbreath because I am not **quite** fast enough ... a slip of my too trusting lips in the right ear ... a losing battle against overwhelming odds where even **I** must retreat ... And her sister will be the one Lilandra holds responsible, in the end for these disasters. Deathbird is correct. **She** is the Viceroy.

For the moment.

No, I am not a subtle man ...

But I **am** very powerful. There is no one here who can stop me, after all.

I bow before the Viceroy Deathbird, the sister of the Majatrix Shi'ar, with a flourish of my cape and a smile.

"It would be my honor to stay and serve you, Viceroy," I assure her. Pleased with herself, she dismisses me with a wave of her smarting hand and calls for a healer. On my way out the door my steps are light, almost bouyant.

My teachers labored diligently to craft me as I am. To instill in my heart a sense of responsibility to something greater than I.

"Kallarch," they told me again and again, "you must always listen to the voice of your honor. And your honor is to serve the best interests of the Imperium. You must never forget that."

And, above all, my teachers were **wise** men.

The End

End
file.